



Ch'an Newsletter

No. 71 April, 1989

Individual and Collective Karma

(Lecture given by Master Sheng-yen on the Surangama Sutra, June 15, 1986)

In the selection of the sutra that we have read today, there are two basic issues, individual and collective karma, and the wrong views or delusions that generate and are generated by these two kinds of karma.

Some part of what you view the world to be is composed of those things unique to you as an individual. This affects your individual, specific karma.

Some part of your world view is composed of a common or collective perception. This affects common, or collective, karma. The common perception may simply relate to your family, your neighborhood, or the nation. Some part of the common perception may relate to all humanity at all times from the past to the future. Or a particular perception may relate to a certain point in time, in history.

Delusions that arise from individual karma are unique to that individual. Members of the same family in the same household view the same thing differently. The same person looking at the same thing at two different times may see two different things.

Once I was interviewed on WBAI. During the show, someone called in and asked about the threat of nuclear war. "Suppose," he said, "someone in power decides to press the button?" "What would you do?" I said, "There's no problem. There is no one who is going to press the button yet." This was sometime after the Central Park demonstration against nuclear weapons when some 100,000 people marched in protest.

I wanted to clarify my answer to the caller. Referring to the demonstration, I said, "These people might not accomplish what they want. It could very well be that one of the demonstrators who is now calling for an end to nuclear weapons might be the one who will later press the button." The caller did not pursue the question, and the matter was dropped at that point.

During a lecture in Taiwan, I mentioned this incident. Someone in the audience thought it was strange to think that a protester against nuclear proliferation would become the one to start a nuclear war. I said, "There's really nothing strange about it. In America people say, 'I've changed my mind,' all the time. And Americans are not the only ones. People all around the world constantly change their minds. It is not uncommon for someone to go from one end of the political spectrum to the other during his lifetime."

Such changes as these arise from deluded views created by individual karma. These delusions create karmic seeds. Only one karmic seed can ripen at any one time. The ripening accords with the environment and historical and political circumstances. As the environment and the times change, different karmic seeds arise and manifest. This pattern of karmic ripening differs from individual to individual.

Individual karma, then, refers to a specific time and place and the views and circumstances that are unique to you and no one else. The time can be past, present, or future. The place can apply to your immediate environment, the human world, or that which is common to all sentient beings.

You may believe that the past has nothing to do with you, but it is precisely what you did in the past that has brought you to your present circumstances. What you did most in the past creates the seeds that ripen fastest. What you did somewhat less produces seeds that ripen more slowly. And what you did the least produces the seeds that ripen the slowest.

The illumination created by a lamp will serve as an analogy. A powerful lamp will cause you to perceive an object sharply and clearly. A less powerful lamp will give a less clearly defined impression of the same object. In the same way, what you did most in the past will have the greatest affect on your environment and the greatest influence on your perception. Those things that you did less frequently will have a weaker pull on your environment and perception.

Yesterday I was talking with a few students about languages, one of them remarked that if you really master your own language, it will be easier for you to learn a second language. The reverse is also true. If you learn a second language your ability will also increase in the first. In fact, if you really concentrate in one particular area of study, you will see the benefits in whatever you do.

Someone who had studied Tibetan Buddhism for ten years asked me if he could begin to study Ch'an. I said to him, "If you can temporarily put aside all of the conceptions you've acquired in pursuing Tibetan Buddhism, then when you practice Ch'an, all the power and benefits of your Tibetan practice will be transformed into energy that you can use in Ch'an. The effort you spent in

studying Tibetan Buddhism will not be wasted. But you must put aside your conceptions. However, there is still the question of why you now consider Ch'an after so much work in Tibetan Buddhism. There may be no need to change. But if you are having particular difficulties that seem to be specific to Tibetan practice, then you may begin to study Ch'an."

The power of what you did in the past will continue into the present and into the future according to the effort that you now expend. What you do now determines the effects or consequences of what you will experience in the future.

Such is the understanding of individual karma — specific acts in the present leading to specific results in the future. Delusions arise from this karma because of the constant change that occurs from past to present to future. Your perspective of events constantly changes. You constantly change your point of view. Your understanding varies from moment to moment. We call this constant change delusion. You may not notice the shift and alteration in perception, but, nonetheless, your views are in constant flux. Did you ever have the experience of believing that you had changed little, when you suddenly realized that you had actually changed quite a bit?

Thus far we have spoken of individual karma in the temporal sense — the way in which it changes through past, present, future. Now I will talk about the delusions that arise from individual karma in the spatial sense: how an individual can be influenced by his environment — family, nation or world.

The way an individual is influenced by what is around him depends on how wide or narrow his focus is. Someone who has cultivated a noble, generous character will move through the world with little concern for himself. He will see himself in relationship to the whole world. A selfish person will look no further than his own welfare. His relationship will only be with himself.

An individual's view of his place in the world determines how he feels about himself and everything that he sees and does. It is these very views and your actions based upon them that contribute to your individual karma.

Someone once came up to me and said, "Shih-fu, my life is really quite meaningless. I contribute nothing to the world. In fact, the world would be a better place if I wasn't in it. Things would be much simpler and much better if I died tomorrow." This was his perspective on the world.

I asked him, "What about your family? Are you married? Do you have children?" And he said, "There's nobody left in my family but me. I never married and I have no children." I said, "Why don't you get married. That may help your problem." But he countered, "The woman I married would marry a nightmare. I

would cause her nothing but problems.” “If you don’t want to get married,” I said, “maybe you should adopt some children and take the responsibility for bringing them up.” But he replied, “How could a boob like me raise kids? I can’t take that kind of responsibility. I’m totally useless.” I said, “It’s exactly because you’re so useless, that you should try to assume some responsibility.”

Sometime later he came back. He looked good and he seemed healthy. “What happened? Do you feel useful?” I asked. “Well,” he said, “I don’t know how useful I am, but at least I’m planning to get married.” “Are you going to adopt,” I asked. “Well,” he said, “I figured that if I was going to get married, I might as well have kids of my own.”

Now he is the father of two children. I asked if he felt useful now. “Well,” he said, “I still consider myself to be a useless person, but I believe that my kids will grow up to be useful people.” “So do you still feel that the world can do without you?” I asked. And he said with no hesitation, “No way. I have to be here to take care of my children and help them to become really useful people.”

You can see how his perspective changed. He started out as an isolated individual. He was a pessimist. Now he’s married and a father. He’s no longer isolated, and he sees the world differently.

Here is a story along similar lines that involves the sangha. A monk I knew thought a great deal about leaving the monastery and taking up lay life again. He told his friends about his problem, and they decided to help him. They saw to it that he got elected Secretary of the Chinese Buddhist Association. The position was important, and it necessitated attending numerous meetings and functions. He was eagerly sought after by a great many people, and he was kept busy all day. This continued for about five years. Then someone asked him if he still wished to return to lay life. He said, “Yes, I would prefer it. But before I became secretary, I was not a public person. No one knew who I was. Had I returned to householder life, no one would have cared. Now I have responsibility and a reputation. I’m known not only in Taiwan, but in other countries. If I left the monkhood and returned to lay life, it would be too embarrassing. I guess I’ll just have to accept my karma.”

This is another example of changed perspective — from the small focus of the individual to the larger focus of the community. The monk was at the point of forsaking his vows, but when he saw the larger picture, the idea dropped from his mind. I think it’s a good story.

Your responsibilities and the role you serve in the community determine how you see things and how you act in your everyday life. Someone I know in Taiwan, a genuine Buddhist practitioner, has become a minister in the government. Before

he held office, he was a serious follower of the faith, and he always esteemed the Buddha and Buddhism exclusively. He had nothing to say about other religions. Once he became a government minister, however, he was aware of the sermons that were given in Christian churches, and he was invited to various ceremonies and functions that were either secular or involved other religions. In his speeches he had something good to say about all religions.

There were monks, however, who accused him of betraying Buddhism. They asked why he was so magnanimous towards other religions. He said, "Personally, I'm still a Buddhist. But I represent the government now, and the government represents all the people, many of whom practice other religions. In my position I have to recognize the existence and merits of these other religions."

There is a United States senator from Hawaii who will serve as another example of someone whose perspective has widened. Ethnically, he is Chinese, so when he visited Taiwan, local newspapers described him as Chinese. When he gave speeches, however, he always said, "I'm an American citizen." But people in Taiwan asked, "How can you say that? You're Chinese." He said, "I'm an American citizen, and I've been elected by American citizens to represent them as their senator. Of course, my heritage is Chinese. My sisters came from China, and I will always have a deep affection for the country of my ancestors. But in my official position I have to concentrate all my efforts towards the benefit of the United States and her people."

There is no confusion in what he is doing. There is nothing wrong with his values or judgement. This is the proper way to act. He may have Chinese blood, but in his official capacity he represents citizens of the United States.

Unfortunately one's perspective doesn't always widen to include the benefit of others. When individuals identify themselves with the world in a particular way and exclude others from that identification, the results can be disastrous: Earlier this century in Germany, Hitler said that his was the master race. All others were inferior, less than human, and in following his perverted views, he tried to exterminate the Jewish people. During the same time in the Orient, the Japanese saw themselves as the direct descendants of heaven, and considered other peoples to be beneath them. They slaughtered thousands of Chinese with no compunction. These examples of enmity arose simply because of views of race. We certainly hope that such terrible events will not be repeated in the future.

Perhaps with this last example we are starting to enter the realm of collective karma — views and actions associated with a particular group which set that group apart from other collective entities.

The way an individual sees the world and the way a given group or community sees the world can be very different. The world as understood by the whole human race will be quite different from a given group or community. And the world we see is different from the world other sentient beings see.

Let's look at the karmic delusions that are common to the entire human race. Generally, we humans believe that it is wrong to eat other human beings. We don't know if such things actually occur, but the consensus among civilized people is that it is unconscionable. But eating animals is all right. They are not the same as us. They are a class below. Even in the animal rights movement, which seeks to save animals from excessive cruelty, there are those that think it's permissible to eat animals. After all they are not human beings; they're animals. This is a value judgement.

Some people might ask, "If we don't eat animals, what could we eat?" Others might say that by eating animals, we can control their populations. Otherwise they might eat us. But if that were really true, people all over the world would be eating roaches, ants, and flies. These insects continue to reproduce and no one eats them.

Nature has its own equilibrium; it takes care of overpopulation in its own way. Besides, most of the animals that humans eat are bred specifically for human consumption.

All of these delusions, individual or collective, never arise from underlying, unchanging criteria. These views and perspectives are in constant flux and are therefore illusory.

What we call common, or collective, karma can pertain to things happening at the same time, to the same species or group, or within the same environment.

I recently read a story in the newspaper about a particular ethnic group in the Middle East. It was unclear whether this race still exists. These people bind the waists of their children at birth so that throughout their lives the waist never expands beyond that of a young child. In China well over 300 years ago the custom of binding the feet of young girls began. The toes were curled and fastened under the foot so that even as an adult a woman's foot would be no longer than three inches. Even though the practice was stopped long ago in China, there are still women living who have bound feet. I recently met an old woman past eighty like this. In China in former times, a girl who had unbound feet was unacceptable, even to the point of being considered immoral. Among the group I spoke about in the Middle East, it was unthinkable not to have your waist tied.

From our point of view we see these customs as nothing less than torture, the deliberate crippling of human beings. It is a punishment that continues through a

whole lifetime. At different times people see the same thing differently. But as you see in these last examples, at certain times in certain places, everybody sees things in a certain way. That is the common or collective perspective.

Recently a dance group from Africa went to Taiwan. The group also went to America and London. The women dancers danced bare-chested. In their native country this was considered a natural way to show the beauty of the body. In Europe and Taiwan, however, there was a problem. It was considered unacceptable and the dancers were banned from performing.

Not long ago some people in Taiwan wanted to start a nudist colony based on ideas they got from the West. This was a way, they felt, of living in accord with nature. The government balked at this, however, and they were not allowed to proceed with their plans. The government said such actions were uncivilized.

Someone asked me what I thought of this movement. I asked, "You mean you want me to take off all of my clothes and lecture here?"

You know, on the Mainland and in Japan there are public baths where men and women bath together. I was once in a public bath in Hokkaido, when I realized there were women there. My first instinct was to get away from the place as fast as I could. Then I realized that such behavior would be inexplicable to my hosts, so I just stayed where I was. Personally, I saw no problem with this, but the general public would find it unacceptable. It is really a matter of consensus. If everyone undresses then that is the thing to do. However, in a situation such as this, I'm not going to be the first to take off my clothes.

The standards to which we try to conform, the criteria by which we judge others, and the views we have of the world are all products of the time and place in which we live. There are no real, unvarying principles behind these values and judgements. And it is because customs, standards, and views are constantly changing that we call them delusions. When the perspective derives from your specific past and life, then that is the delusion of individual karma. When the perspective is determined by a group of whatever size or an environment of any description, then that is the delusion of collective karma.

NEWS & EVENTS

Shih-fu came back from Taiwan on April 10, and immediately left for England on April 11 to conduct a seven-day retreat. This event was organized by Dr. John Crook, professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Bristol. The retreat was held in a farm house in Wales. Nineteen people participated. Most were professors and graduate students from the University. Most of them have practiced more than ten years; some as long as twenty years. For all of them, this was the first Ch'an retreat, and Shih-fu was the first Ch'an master they encounter. At the end, most of them wish to participate on another retreat with Shih-fu. Dr. Crook was given permission by Shih-fu to hold future Ch'an retreats in England.

During this retreat, Shih-fu lectured on 'Calming the Mind' by Wang Ming Shih. These lectures were recorded; Dr. Crook will edit them into a book.

Shih-fu came back to New York on April 20. Then he began a lecture tour at the University of Iowa, University of Minesota and University of Wisconsin from April 24 to April 30. He will be back in New York on May 1.

May

- | | |
|--------|-------------------------------|
| 5-6 | One-day Sitting |
| 14 | Buddha's Birthday Celebration |
| 20 | Beginner's Meditation Class |
| 26-6/3 | Seven-day retreat |

June

- | | |
|--------|-----------------------------|
| 17 | One-day Recitation |
| 24 | Beginner's Meditation Class |
| 30-7/8 | Seven-day retreat |

Please call to register or for more information — (718) 592-6593